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CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS[1]

INTEGER ET LAETUS

FEW of the poets of Rome were natives of the city. They came from all over Italy—in later times, from all over the Empire. Inevitably, however, they gravitated to the capital, there to find the life and audience that suited them; only the shy, sensitive Virgil could keep away for long. But even when their name was made they did not forget the humbler town of their origin, Mantua or Verona or Venusia, proud to have added fresh laurels to it, and not ashamed to say so. And the towns in turn were proud of their sons.

Less than a hundred miles east of Rome, on the railway to Pescara, the Apennines enclose a small, undulating plain watered by many streams and graced with poplars:

> Here Sulmo lies amid Pelignian hills,
> Small, but for ever fresh with watering rills.
> Though sun draw near and soil begin to crack
> Under the Dogstar's merciless attack,
> Pelignian fields with trickling streams abound,
> And luscious herbage clothes the softened ground.
> Corn-crops are grown, and vines surpassing these,
> With here and there a patch of olive-trees,
> And where the brook glides softly through the reeds
> Thick tufts of grass cover the watermeads.*[2]

One is not surprised to find a Corso Ovidio among the streets of the modern Sulmona, and a renaissance statue of Ovid in the

* The unfailing water and greenness were what remained in Ovid's memory. He recalls them quite irrelevantly at *F.* IV, 686, for instance.

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courtyard of the Palazzo del Convitto;* for who (save some prisoners in the last war) would ever have heard of Sulmona, *bel paese* though it is, or gone out of his way to visit it, if the poet had not been born there?

> Atque aliquis spectans hospes Sulmonis aquosi
> moenia, quae campi iugera pauca tenent,
> 'quae tantum', dicet, 'potuistis ferre poetam,
> quantulacunque estis, vos ego magna voco.'[3]
>
> *So shall the stranger, gazing on the walls*
> *That watch o'er Sulmo's plots and waterfalls,*
> *Cry, 'Thou that such a poet didst beget,*
> *Small though thou be, yet will I call thee great.'*

One detail may puzzle the uninitiated. At Rome the letters S.P.Q.R. appear on trams, public buildings, civic documents and so forth, and we know what they mean; but what is the meaning of the letters S.M.P.E. which we read everywhere here? The answer does credit both to the municipality and to its poet who boasted, 'Sulmo Mihi Patria Est'.†[4]

To most Greek authors it had not occurred that their readers might wish to know about themselves as well as about their message. If they became autobiographical, as Plato did in his *Seventh Letter* or Isocrates in his *Antidosis*, it was generally for some ulterior purpose. Roman *humanitas* knew no such reticence. It is true that Horace's accounts of his early life in *Satires* I, 6 and II, 6 are given to support an argument, but in the First Book of the *Epistles* he sometimes tells of himself because he assumes that the recipient of the letter, and the general public after him, will be interested; and at the end he gives a miniature self-portrait, much as a modern poet might supply his publisher with a photograph for

* Bindi, *Monumenti degli Abruzzi*, says that this statue is really of Marco Barbato, poet friend of Petrarch, who was born at Sulmona and died in 1362. But no matter; to the people of the place it is Ovid.

† This device, found on the cathedral apse, goes back at least to the thirteenth century.[5]

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the frontispiece. The publication of Cicero's correspondence in all its mass of unsifted detail is evidence enough of a public interest in individuals as intense as ours today.

From time to time in the course of his works Ovid tells us this or that about his life. At *Amores* I, 3, 10, for instance, he mentions that both his parents find it necessary to economize, or to make him economize (it is not clear which); and he begins an account of a festival at Falerii, just as some modern journalist or broadcaster might do in order to add a touch of human interest, by saying that he only chanced to witness it because his wife comes from there.[6] In the nostalgia of exile he becomes still more reminiscent, and in *Tristia* IV, 10 he gives us an unusually detailed piece of autobiography.

Publius Ovidius Naso was born on March 10, 43 B.C., exactly a year after his brother.[7] The equestrian status of his family was of long standing, not recently acquired in the ups and downs of the civil wars like that of so many others.[8] The name Ovidius, common on inscriptions in that Pelignian neighbourhood but not found elsewhere, would attest his origin from that race even if he had not himself claimed to be its glory.[9] The sturdy Pelignians had been ringleaders in the Social War, when their town of Corfinium was selected as capital by the Confederates and renamed Italica. Ovid rejoiced in the free spirit in his race,

> Quam sua libertas ad honesta coegerat arma,
> cum timuit socias anxia Roma manus.[10]

> *Whom love of freedom drove to righteous arms*
> *When Allied bands filled Rome with dire alarms.*

All this was long happily over. The Pelignians were proud of the Roman status they had fought to gain; and some recent forebear distinguished for his nose had earned for Ovid's family the Latin *cognomen* of Naso.

Ovid's father, without being rich, was reasonably well off. He sent his two sons to Rome, probably about 31 B.C., the year of the

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Battle of Actium,[11] and put them under distinguished teachers—*insignes urbis ab arte viros*. Let us see what kind of education they were likely to have had.[12]

After learning, from the age of seven to eleven or twelve, to read and write under an elementary schoolmaster (*litterator*, *ludi magister*), the more favoured Roman boy proceeded to secondary education. In theory, since the Roman system was simply the Hellenistic transplanted, a boy's curriculum comprised the whole ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία (*artes liberales*); but in practice the mathematics, music and the rest appear to have been very much subsidiary subjects, taken only by a few, and it was the *grammaticus* who dominated the scene.*[13]

The *grammaticus* was a man such as the celebrated Orbilius, who held the rod over Horace while he studied the old Latin version of the *Odyssey* by Livius Andronicus. He taught formal grammar on Greek lines, explained authors word by word, supplied mythological and historical background, commented on points of literary or philosophical interest, and imparted a correct intonation and delivery.[14] We may also assume with some confidence that before a promising boy left his *grammaticus* he was at home in the Greek language and literature. (When Cicero began to give lessons in rhetoric to his son and nephew, he preferred Greek to Latin as the medium of instruction.[15]) Finally, there were prescribed exercises on themes, which served as a prelude to the higher courses in rhetoric.†[16]

The Romans did not make the mistake of having a fixed age for passing from one school to another any more than for assuming the gown of manhood, realizing that individual boys differ both in their capacities and in their rate of development. We do not know when Ovid, no doubt precocious, passed on from the

* The course proposed by Vitruvius (I, I, 3) for budding architects, including drawing, optics, history, philosophy, music, medicine, law and astronomy, sounds utopian.

† Greek as an element of Roman education began in the days of Scipio the Younger, reached its peak with Cicero, and then gradually declined with the growth of Latin literature.

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grammaticus to the *rhetor*. But we may now turn to examine the rhetorical schools of his day.

When Cicero was young, at the beginning of the first century, it was still the custom to put a promising boy in the hands of some distinguished statesman or speaker, whom he accompanied everywhere, thereby obtaining not only an apprenticeship in oratory but an invaluable introduction to public life. There were also, however, schools of rhetoric. Hitherto these had been run by Greeks in the Greek tongue, but about that time one Plotius Gallus first began to teach rhetoric in Latin.[17] Cicero's conservative mentors advised him to stick to Greek, as being a better training, apart from the consideration that the new school had an odour of radicalism;[18] but by the end of the Republic schools of Latin declamation were dominant.

After the establishment of the principate the Forum lost much of its importance as the centre of political as distinct from juridical life. More and more public work was undertaken by the Emperor's own staff of freedmen. Decisions were taken by the Emperor himself, or by influential civil servants, while the Senate and the Rostra became largely a façade. The intense controversies of the late Republic had no longer any place. Henceforward, in the well-known words of Messalla in Tacitus' *Dialogus de Oratoribus*,[19] 'the long quiet of the times, the continual calm of the people, the unbroken tranquillity of the senate, and in particular the discipline imposed by the Emperor, reduced eloquence itself, like everything else, to a state of peace'.

It was not merely that eloquence had now a diminished role in public life: its subjects were restricted to the uncontroversial, unobjectionable, and therefore academic. At the beginning of the first century the themes of the schools had included subjects of burning topical interest: 'Should Italians receive the rights of citizenship?' or 'Scipio Nasica is impeached for the murder of Tiberius Gracchus'.[20] But now the issues that occupied men's thoughts and hushed conversation, the really interesting topics, could not be handled at all in public. What rhetorician would

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have dared to announce such a subject as 'Caesar Octavian deliberates whether to institute proscriptions on his return from Alexandria', or 'Cornelius Gallus defends himself on a charge of treason'? No doubt the logical course would have been to admit that rhetoric had little future and to reform the educational system accordingly. But men do not readily appreciate fundamental changes of situation where most of the externals are unchanged; they tend rather to modify existing institutions and later, if pressed, to find new arguments in their favour. Thus when printing was invented, University lectures, which existed mainly because of the inadequate supply of manuscript books, lost much of their *raison d'être*. But there were the class-rooms and the lecturers, and a University without lectures was unthinkable; so the institution has continued to this day, while other grounds of justification have been emphasized or discovered.

Two kinds of exercise were practised in the schools and coteries of rhetoric, the *suasoria* and the *controversia*. A *suasoria* was a theme for soliloquy, generally of a historical nature, though historical facts could be treated as cavalierly as they are in a modern film,[21] especially where ancient Greek history was concerned. The elder Seneca has left us specimens of the treatment of seven such themes by Augustan rhetoricians of his youth. The two most interesting to us are, 'Cicero deliberates whether to beg Antony for mercy' (No. 6), and 'Cicero deliberates whether to burn his writings, Antony having promised him safety on that condition' (No. 7). Clearly these are subjects for impassioned declamation, not for serious argument: they 'expect the answer "no"'.

A *controversia* was the discussion of a complicated imaginary law-suit. The situations were bizarre, the details were vague, and the law given as a basis for the argument may occasionally have been either obsolete or Greek or factitious.* These features would suggest that approximation to the conditions of real life was not the primary concern of the exercise. For this it has been roundly

* The old idea, however, that the laws used were *mainly* factitious has been strongly contested recently by F. Lanfranchi,[22] and by Bonner.[23]

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abused, both in ancient and modern times. Petronius' hero maintains that the unreal world of the schools unfits young men for practical life: they live in a world of 'pirates standing in chains on the beach, tyrants pen in hand ordering sons to cut off their fathers' heads, oracles in time of pestilence demanding the blood of three virgins or more, honey-balls of phrases, every word and act besprinkled with poppy-seed and sesame'.[24] Petronius himself was writing a picaresque novel, a form of literature which earlier ages had lacked; and, as Boissier suggested,[25] it was perhaps just because the Augustans were somewhat starved of romance in their literature that their rhetoric took on these romantic colours.*

There is much indeed to be said against the schools of declamation. Quite apart from any sensationalism in the subject-matter, pressing one side of a question for victory is not the best form of education for those who have not learnt 'to seek for truth in the company of friends'. But surely we have heard too often that argument about academic studies having no relation to 'real life', and the kind of person who uses it nowadays should be a warning against condemning the rhetoricians out of hand. If one is setting an essay question, one may rightly avoid choosing a topical subject which the pupil is likely to have seen or heard discussed; one wants to make him think for himself. We should therefore hesitate before we criticize Roman educators who thought that if you teach a boy to think for himself at all, he will be able to think straight about any given subject.† By keeping the details vague they gave more scope for variety and imagination; and by introducing pirates and tyrants they made the questions more exciting (what harm, if mind-training, not truth to life, were the object?); while the complications and coincidences were essential if the problem was to afford more than a simple and obvious line of treatment.

And after all, are we so different? Dip into recent Cambridge

* *Alitur enim atque enitescit velut pabulo laetiore facundia*—Quintilian.[26]

† *Instruit etiam quos non sibi exercet*—Seneca.[27]

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examination papers and you may come across such a question as this:

'Hay, Wheat and Corn walk down the street on the way to the Cromwell Arms. Hay, while bending down to tie his shoe laces, is injured when the sign attached to the side of the public house unexpectedly collapses. Wheat endeavours to assist him, but is knocked unconscious by a barrel of beer which rolls out of an open doorway on the upper floor of the building. Corn hurries off to call Dr Barley, but falls into a bear-pit in the private drive of the doctor's surgery and breaks his arm.

Advise Hay, Wheat and Corn according to the principles of (*a*) Roman, (*b*) English law.'[28]

In some Latin countries the historical declamation continued to play a part in education almost up to the present century. M. Émile Ripert, who as Hannibal had spoken to his troops on the Alps and as Bossuet had directed the thoughts of the Dauphin, found the recollection of his training far from dull:

'Puéril et passionnant exercice! Pour un instant nous échappions aux réalités scolaires et bourgeoises qui nous entouraient. Petits écoliers de rhétorique en quelque sous-préfecture, nous étions les maîtres du monde, les généraux vainqueurs, les poètes illustres: nous donnions des conseils, nous faisions des remontrances aux grands de la terre. Enivrement de la seizième année! Notre enthousiasme livresque nous plaçait de plainpied avec ce que l'humanité a porté de plus glorieux.'[29]

The declamation was the ancient counterpart of our essay. It taught young men both how to arrange their thoughts in a logical and orderly manner and how to express them forcefully and with careful art, though it suffered from two not intrinsic faults, the prevailing bad taste and the Roman indifference to truth. In addition, it taught elocution and delivery in general, virtues in which we are apt to be miserably deficient. The Romans had more respect for their language than we have for ours; few people to-

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day express themselves so well on paper as the general run of Cicero's correspondents, let alone Cicero himself.

The *rhetor* whom Ovid admired most was a flamboyant Spaniard of highly individual talent, Marcus Porcius Latro. He borrowed from him ideas and epigrams for his poems, but finding his style unsuitable as a model for himself, he joined the class of the 'Asiatic' Arellius Fuscus, another of the four outstanding virtuosos of the day. Even as a student he was considered a good declaimer. It is not surprising to hear that he preferred the *suasoria*, which demanded chiefly imagination and the expression of emotions, to the *controversia*, which involved reasoning from a given law. 'His genius was for neatness, elegance and charm. Already at that time his style seemed nothing else than free verse.'[30]

If ever he did declaim a *controversia*, it was liable to be one with an ethical flavour; and it so happens that it is from his treatment of such a theme that Seneca gives us illustrative excerpts. This document[31] is so curious and so significant that I will quote from it at some length. The theme was as follows: 'A man and wife have sworn an oath together that if anything happens to either, the other will die. The husband, having gone abroad, has sent a messenger to the wife to say that he is dead. The wife has thrown herself down from a height; but her life has been saved, and she is being ordered by her father to leave her husband. She refuses, and is disowned.' It is easy to see how this subject might appeal to Ovid: the faithfulness of a woman to a man who has risked killing her to test her devotion is one of those paradoxes of love's psychology which fascinated him. Here are some relics of what he put into the husband's mouth, odd sentences that remained stored up in the prodigious memory (if we may believe him) of Seneca:

'My whole task consists in this, to get you to agree that a wife may love her husband and a husband may love his wife. It follows that, if you permit them to love, you must permit them to take such an oath. And what oath do you think we took? It was in your name that we swore: she invoked the wrath of her father, I of my father-in-law, in the event of our proving untrue. Father,

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have mercy. We did not break our oath.... In love you may more easily demand an end than a limit. Do you then expect to ensure that they keep to the limits you have approved, do nothing inconsiderately, promise nothing that they will not feel bound to perform, and weigh every word in the scales of reason and honour? That is how old men love.... You know, father, what our few transgressions were: we sometimes quarrelled and struck one another, and believe it or not, we sometimes broke our vows. What concern of a father are lovers' oaths? Why they do not even concern the gods.... You have no cause, my wife, to pride yourself, as though you were the first to sin thus: there have been wives who perished with their husband, and wives who perished for their husband; but every age will honour them, every genius celebrate them....'

There speaks the future author of the *Heroides*, albeit with the crudity and banality of a schoolboy. We have heard so much about the effect (assumed to be bad) of rhetoric on his poetry, that we ought to make sure what is meant by this.* Seneca tells us that Ovid was bored by argumentation,[32] and he says himself that, while his brother succeeded at the bar, his own bent was always for the Muses.[33] Among his contemporaries the rhetoricians counted him among the poets, and the poets among the rhetoricians.[34] He himself, writing from his exile to the rhetorician Cassius Salanus, finds a common element between them in ardour or intensity (*calor*):

> Distat opus nostrum, sed fontibus exit ab isdem,
> artis et ingenuae cultor uterque sumus;
> thyrsus enim vobis, gestata est laurea nobis,
> sed tamen ambobus debet inesse calor.
> utque meis numeris tua dat facundia nervos,
> sic venit a nobis in tua verba nitor.
> iure igitur studio confinia carmina vestro
> et commilitii sacra tuenda putas.†[35]

* Fränkel has some admirable remarks on this subject.[36]
† In line 3, which is corrupt, *vobis* and *nobis* should perhaps be interchanged.

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